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Movie Pictures 'Che?' As Vicious Psychopath

THIS MAY come as a shock to some readers of this column. It did to me.

"Che," the 20th Century Fox movie about the late revolutionary Che Guevara which has not been able to play South Florida because of militant outrage, finally enjoyed an uninterrupted screening Thursday night at the 21st St. Art Theater on Miami Beach.

After all the protests, picketing, violence and bombastic speeches (and one man recently pulled a gun on a cashier according to one police report), I expected to see a leftist oriented film glorifying Che, or at least a picture that took a neutral (safe) position, passing over Che's many sins in the hopes of avoiding controversy.

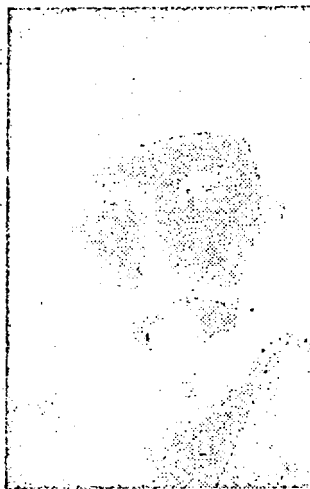
Ironically, and to my utter astonishment, "Che" is not neutral at all.

IT SO HAPPENS that the film takes a very severe view of the late revolutionary, even to the point of being unfair and historically inaccurate at times. Far from showing Che as an intelligent and noble fighter for freedom, it presents him as a man with courage and ideals who goes sour very early in the Castro era, and who eventually becomes a vicious, stupid, hypocritical and suicidal psychopath.

According to "Che," Guevara was responsible for the brutality and terror that first appeared during Castro's stay in the mountains of Oriente province, when hapless guerillas were shot right and left on the flimsiest pretext.

ACCORDING TO "Che," and this I suspect is a bit un-

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SECOND INTERNATIONAL EDITION



Jack Palance
... as Fidel Castro

fair, Guevara was completely responsible for the mass executions that occurred immediately after Castro took power in Havana. Castro is seen rather comically running around making speeches while Che sits back and coolly orders murder after murder.

According to "Che," Guevara insulted the Russians, nearly provoked an all-out nuclear war, and even urged a horrified Castro to shoot Russian troops and seize Russian missile installations.

According to the film, Guevara failed in Bolivia because he was stupid, egotistical, brutal, and arrogant. Ignoring his own handbook on guerilla warfare, Che bullied and robbed the peasants. In his language, Che became a fish without a sea.

WHILE MUCH of the picture is flawed for structural reasons, the end of the film is quite good. Using a bit of dramatic license, the filmmakers have Che confronted by an old man who has betrayed Guevara to CIA-trained troops.

The old man is asked why he betrayed Che. He answers that nobody consulted him about the war. "Free me from what?" he says. He adds that he doesn't want either side around his village. The gunfire frightens his goats. They won't produce milk.

Artistically, "Che" is not unintelligent and does rather well in handling an extremely controversial historical figure. The film shows Che as an idealist who became obsessed with violence, a reasonable enough statement.

It also shows that while he became too obsessed with the means and not the end, at one time at least he bravely fought to rid the world of men like the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista.

UNFORTUNATELY, the makers utilize flashbacks and flashbacks within flashbacks. Excitement, dramatic impact, continuity, momentum are all lost.

Omar Sharif, as Che, gives an interesting performance, although he's too passive and not nearly as sinister as he might be. Jack Palance, as Castro, is better. He seems to have studied Castro's speaking style and mannerisms and looks remarkably like the Cuban dictator.

THERE ARE two problems that have nothing to do with the film itself:

"Che" is being shown in a nudie theater where the owners run skin film trailers. This is very poor judgment; surely the operators are aware that "Che" is attracting a different audience. Also, the theater is inadequate — the sound is very bad.

It is perhaps the year's biggest irony, and certainly an eloquent comment against censorship, that for all these years the local anti-Castroites and anti-Ches have been blocking a movie that happens to be very close to their own point of view.

I THINK I know why. Many people, Americans and especially those who might have lived under a culturally repressing autocratic government, are not familiar with the style and approach of contemporary film.

I suspect that many of the militants who've protested "Che" have done so because they thought it would be like "The Jim Thorpe Story" or Audie Murphy's film biography, "To Hell And Back," namely highly favorable and flattering to the main character.

But they don't make films that way anymore. Even "Patton," a film about a hugely popular American general who helped win World War II, showed many negative facets to Patton's character and life.